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Atari Online News, Etc.
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A-ONE #1139 09/25/09

~ Yahoo Director To Leave ~ People Are Talking! ~ China Clamps Down!
~ Gmail Disrupted Again! ~ Laptops Come of Age! ~ Video Game Museum?
~ Want Windows 7 Cheap? ~ Fight Worms, Use Ants! ~ Wii $50 Price Cut!

-* ’Open Internet’ Rules Vital! *-
-* Exec Blames E-mail for Staff Stress *-
-* A Primer on Bungie’s Halo 3: ODST, Out Now *-

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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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It’s getting to the point that we may as well get rid of the four seasons; we don’t realize them anyway, so what’s the point of having them? I’m still waiting for spring to arrive, and it’s already autumn! Where did the time go? I only realized we arrived in fall because I hit another birthday! I wouldn’t really complain too much, but I really enjoy spring and summer!

Anyway, what’s the deal with "social" sites, like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and the like? I must admit, I’ve not even had an inkling to check them out. To me, all they seem to be are glorified chat rooms - something "we" had years ago! Add instant messaging, or whatever, and you have these kinds of web hangouts! Tweet me, Facebook me - what?!?! I just don’t understand the fascination. But then again, I haven’t experienced that stuff. Maybe I’m getting old, but it boggles the mind! Okay, my mind!

Otherwise, it’s been a quiet week. Slow for news, slow for editorial ideas. Even work has slowed down this week - hopefully not too slow, though. And, I’m still tired at the end of day, and exhausted by the end of the week (today!). But they say, and this too, will pass. So, let’s move on, get to this week’s issue; and we’ll start all over again next week!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and all my crowing about our health care system has come home to roost.

On Monday, I woke up to find my right hand and forearm numb. It just hung there like a dead tree branch, and I couldn’t get it to do anything. Thinking I’d just slept on it funny, I pressed on with my day: Feeding the dogs (which was disastrous, since I dropped and broke a food bowl) and trying to type on my laptop keyboard. I used to make jokes about guys on porn sites typing one-handed, and now I was doing it just trying to answer emails.

It took about three hours for the feeling to start coming back, and by that time I was in the Emergency Room, with EKG electrodes on my chest and a butterfly needle in my arm, getting ready to go 'downstairs' for a CT scan.

Everything looked good... no problems with EKG, blood work or CT scan. Both the ER doctor and my physician tell me that it was a TIA... a sort of mini-stroke. I'm not sure they're right and think I may have just slept in a bad position and pinched the heck out of the nerve. But until the results from the MRI I had the other day and an ultrasound test on the arteries in the neck are in, I'm heeding their advice to do as little as possible until we know for sure.

So this is my column in its entirety this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Nintendo Cuts Wii Price by $50!
A Primer on Bungie's Halo 3: ODST!
Video Game Classics Need Museum?
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Nintendo Cutting Wii Price by $50 to $200

Nintendo on Sunday will cut the price of its popular Wii console by $50, in a bid to broaden its appeal among potential new customers as it prepares to release the Wii Fit-Plus and New Super Mario Bros. games.

The Wii, whose game control senses motions without having relying solely on buttons and levers, is the top selling console worldwide. The new $199.99 Wii will include the Wii Remote controller, Nunchuk controller and Wii Sports software.

"Our research shows there are 50 million Americans thinking about becoming gamers, and this more affordable price point and our vast array of new software mean many of them can now make the leap and find experiences that appeal to them," said Cammie Dunaway, Nintendo of America's executive vice president of sales & marketing, in a statement late Wednesday.

Speculation about a price cut had grown after the other two console makers, Sony Corp. and Microsoft Corp., reduced prices on their systems in August. And video game blog Kotaku has posted what it said were images of flyers from major retailers advertising a coming price cut.

Console price cuts are customary for the video game industry after the systems have celebrated a birthday or two, because they help lure in mass audiences who don't want to spend large chunks of cash on them.

The recession, however, has made them even more important, especially as game companies gear up for the holiday shopping season, when the video game industry makes most of its money. Without the price cuts, it would be difficult to entice budget-conscious shoppers to buy the machines.

Nintendo had been the only one of the three console makers to forgo a price cut so far. But it also started off at a lower price point when it launched in 2006. With a $50 price cut, the Wii will be tied with Microsoft's low-end Xbox 360 Arcade as the cheapest. Following $100 price cuts in August, Microsoft's Xbox 360 Elite and Sony's basic PlayStation 3 now cost about $300.

The price cut is coming just ahead of big game releases for the company - Wii Fit-Plus on Oct. 4 and the multiplayer New Super Mario Bros-Wii on Nov. 15. Nintendo also is kicking off a sampling tour next month to introduce its games and hardware to new players. Reggie Fils-Aime, president of Nintendo of America, told The Associated Press that the sampling series is expected to give about one million game enthusiasts the chance to try out any of Nintendo's titles.

Together, the new Wii price, game releases and sampling series are designed to position Nintendo for a strong holiday season, Fils-Aime said. He noted that 170 third-party titles will launch for Wii by the end of the year, and 150 games for its handheld Nintendo Ds and Dsi devices.

A Primer on Bungie's Halo 3: ODST, Available Now

Microsoft's Xbox 360 fall action headliner Halo 3: ODST arrives today with all the gravitas of a question mark. A Halo without the series' golden-visored, plasteel-clad paragon Master Chief? No gravity-defying leaps or Usain Bolt-caliber sprinting? No damage-sapping personal force-field? And Microsoft wants you to pay sixty bucks for what again exactly?

Let's talk plot positioning. Halo 3: ODST technically counts as Halo 3-point-five, except that's not exactly right. Its story occurs before the operatic gunplay of Halo 3 (PCW Score: 85%), so it's really more like Halo 2-and-a-half. In Halo 2, the alien Covenant attack Earth and you engage the early parts of that game repulsing them. In retreat, one of their faster-than-light jump ships generates a disastrous shockwave above a fictional African city. In ODST, you play a "rookie" United Nations Space Command soldier trapped in the city after the calamity, scouring the wreckage for your missing squad-mates.

The idea for ODST began as an expansion pack for Halo 3, just a couple hours of first-person run-and-gunnery devoted to the unsung heroes of

the series, the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, aka the guys blown to smithereens as you piloted Master Chief around the last three games like a Jedi bulldozer. Somewhere along the way ODST became something more, something ostensibly capacious enough to warrant hiking the price tag from bargain expansion territory to full-blown $60 standalone game.

ODST's takeaway sounds simple enough: Think Call of Duty lite (or as some have quipped, Halo of Duty) with a sci-fi slant and battles channeled via flashbacks. As you pick through the rubble for signs of your teammates, you'll find artifacts that trigger throwback sequences--you play through these as each respective team member, experiencing their "personal" stories firsthand.

Your ballistic pallet's limited to simpler weapons here, so pistols and submachine guns instead of high flying stuff like Halo 3's energy swords and gravity hammers. You'll take debilitating damage from single shots, and without medical assistance, you can even bleed out. You'll also have to scramble and skirmish between cover points instead of leaping over or charging around them. On the flipside, you've got a new tracking heads-up-display that pegs enemies with red outlines and notable items with yellow ones.

All told, it's intended as a grittier, more human Halo. That the voice acting's carried off by guys like Nathan Fillion, Alan Tudyk, and Adam Baldwin (also Battlestar Galactica's Tricia Helfer) has led a few to make Firefly comparisons. The design team's admitted they're fans of Joss Whedon's critically acclaimed cowboy sci-fi TV series. Given the latter's roughneck pedigree, it seems an apt enough comparison.

ODST also ships with a dedicated multiplayer disc, though it's primarily loaded with old Halo 3 maps and only a smattering of new ODST ones. "Firelight," the game's single new mode adds cooperative multiplayer for up to four players. Like in Gears of War 2's "Horde" mode, you start off shooting fish in a barrel and wind up fending off their angrier, deadlier, steroid-popping betters.

Is it worth sixty bucks? The early critical reaction seems broadly positive, though there's also broadening consensus that a six-hour campaign and one new multiplayer mode don't justify the price tag. It probably comes down to whether you're Halo-do-or-die or merely Halo-for-the-heck-of-it.

Gran Turismo 5 Coming in March Next Year

The latest installation in the hit "Gran Turismo" driving simulation series for the PlayStation 3 will be coming in the first quarter of next year, Sony announced Thursday at the Tokyo Game Show.

The game had been rumored to hit store shelves this year but won't be available until March 2010 in Japan, said Kazunori Yamauchi during a news conference. Launch dates for other markets were not announced and pricing was not discussed.

Despite giving fans a few more months to wait for the title, Yamauchi provided more information about the game that might make it worth the wait. The game will feature 950 cars including new hybrid and electric models and 20 driving locations. Other improvements will include

simulated damage and movable objects on the race track.

Several different game-play modes will also be offered and it will be possible to export videos from the game to YouTube or capture 8-megapixel quality resolution images. The game will also deliver an online element including the Gran Turismo TV feature that was introduced in the previous edition.

Video Game Classics Need Museum, Say "Retrogamers"

A group of self-styled French "Retrogamers" is calling for the creation of a special museum for the classic video arcade games that bewitched millions of teenagers in the 1980s.

"It’s one thing to have a stock of old consoles, and of course we’re happy with that, but what you really want to do is play the games.

"A video game isn’t there to be looked at like a painting or a sculpture, you only really get a feel for it with the joystick in your hand," said Guillaume Verdun, prime mover in the group, called MO5.com.

The "Retrogamers" are lobbying the authorities to set up a "National Institute of Digital Sciences" that would include fully working versions of classics like Super Mario - the animated adventures of a moustachioed American plumber - or "Pong", the primitive black-and-white ping-pong whose animated complexity ran to two movable white lines between which players bounced a slowly moving white square.

Verdun says his organisation has already been in touch with the French National Library and Paris’ biggest science museum, the Cite des Sciences.

They have even contacted the office of Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet, the French minister responsible for the digital economy.

He nevertheless recognises that his campaign to give his beloved arcade games and consoles the recognition he feels they deserve is likely to take some time.

"We’re moving ahead bit by bit, but we know it is likely to be years before things fully take shape," he said.

But visitors to a weekend video games festival in Paris got a taste of what the hoped-for museum could be like.

The festival was essentially a trade fair for the multi-billion dollar video games industry, which has fallen on hard times recently with sales down 14 percent in the first five months or 2009.

But tucked away among fabulous displays of the latest 3D and "enhanced reality" games were the retrogamers, where many a 40-something former arcade ace could be found wistfully reliving his or her lost youth.

"I hadn’t played the first Mario since I was a teenager. It’s very moving to find these video game monuments as this is an industry where people are usually waiting for the next technological development," said 38-year-old Adrien.

The creators of the retrogaming space went to great lengths to re-create the feel of the old arcade game and consoles, with all the games on display connected to old-style cathode ray television monitors rather than modern, flat liquid crystal screens.

The president of the video games festival, Jonathan Dumont, said he was happy to welcome the retrogamers amid all of the latest high-tech offerings.

He said he found the interest for the old games "encouraging", arguing that the enthusiasm showed that video games were "beginning to acquire the status of real works of art."

"Lots of people watch old films," he said, adding that the growing enthusiasm for old video games was a logical evolution of this and proof that video games had reached a certain maturity.

"People are no longer just looking at the technical aspects but also their artistic qualities," he added.

The game-makers themselves seem more divided about the desirability of preserving classic games.

According to Verdun, some companies like Nintendo and Sega are "sensitive" to the need to preserve video game history, even going so far as to supply MO5.com with spare parts for old consoles.

Other firms however seem totally focused on the next big thing and "don’t necessarily see the interest" in preserving these flashing, beeping relics of our digital history.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

FCC Chairman Says ’Open Internet’ Rules Are Vital

The chairman of the Federal Communications Commission on Monday proposed the most wide-ranging and specific rules so far for regulating how Internet service providers and wireless carriers handle subscriber traffic.

While the FCC has intervened a few times to discipline home broadband providers for blocking or hampering certain types of traffic, the proposal by Chairman Julius Genachowski could result in the first solid rules. It is also aimed at regulating, for the first time, how wireless companies carry Internet traffic to cell phones.

Telecommunications executives warned that the proposal looks like a solution in search of a problem. They said that unless the regulations are carefully implemented, the rules could stifle investment in Internet access.

Reactions to the ideas from Genachowski, who was appointed by President Barack Obama, broke down along partisan lines. Republican senators said there was no need for an unprecedented expansion of Internet regulation. Obama said that on the contrary, well-crafted regulation of the Internet would encourage investment and innovation.

Internet service providers, both wired and wireless, are struggling with the question of how to distribute network capacity among their subscribers. Heavy users can overwhelm cellular towers and neighborhood cable circuits, slowing traffic for everyone.

At the same time, consumer advocates and Web companies like Google Inc. want to safeguard what has been an underlying "Net neutrality" assumption of the Internet: that all types of data are treated equally. If the carriers can degrade or block traffic, they become the gatekeepers of the Internet, able to shut out innovative services, these critics say.

Last year, the FCC sanctioned Comcast Corp. for secretly hampering file-sharing traffic by its cable-modem subscribers. In that ruling, the agency relied on broad "principles" of open Internet access that hadn’t previously been put to the test. Comcast sued the FCC, saying the agency didn’t have the authority to tell the company how to run its network. The case is still in federal appeals court.

Genachowski is now proposing to make it a formal rule that Internet carriers cannot discriminate against certain types of traffic by degrading service. That expands on the principle that they cannot "block" traffic, as articulated in a 2005 policy statement.

Genachowski also made clear in his webcast speech Monday at the Brookings Institute in Washington that wireless carriers should be subject to the same principles. That may mean that a carrier couldn’t, for example, ban the use of file-sharing services on its wireless network, which AT&T Inc. does now.

The government also has been investigating Apple Inc.’s process for approving programs for its iPhones, but Genachowski isn’t directly addressing manufacturers’ right to determine which applications run on their devices.

Still, it’s unclear how the principles would apply in practice. The proposal is the starting point for a process to hammer out detailed rules in the coming months. Genachowski also left the door open to treating wireless networks differently than wired networks in the final regulations.

Comcast has already changed its system to one that does not look at what types of traffic subscribers are using. Instead, it throttles back the speed of heavy users if there is congestion on the network. However, there are other companies that might run up against the rules outlined by Genachowski. Cox Communications, another cable company, has been testing a system that slows traffic that it deems less time-sensitive, like file downloads and software updates, to keep Web pages, streaming video and online games working faster.

Cox declined to comment. But other Internet service providers said they worried the government would reach too far into the way they do business.

Jim Cicconi, AT&T’s top executive in Washington, said the company would be "very disappointed" if the FCC has already concluded that it needs to "regulate wireless services despite the absence of any compelling evidence of problems or abuse."

Similarly, David Cohen, executive vice president at Comcast, said he welcomed the "dialogue" suggested by the FCC chairman, but also said it would be important to first figure out if there are "actual and substantial problems that may require rules."

David Young, vice president of federal regulatory affairs at Verizon Communications Inc., said he was pleased that Genachowski said he favored a light touch in setting up the new regulatory framework. If Internet carriers aren’t free to experiment with different ways of treating traffic, "it will stifle innovation, investment and growth," he said.

"To dramatically change the 15-year policy of the United States government to not regulate the Internet is a pretty radical thing and should be driven by a very real and present need to do so," Young said.

Genachowski’s two fellow Democrats on the five-seat FCC said Monday they supported the proposal, which will give Genachowski a majority to push it through. The two Republican commissioners, Robert McDowell and Meredith Baker, urged caution, suggesting that new regulations not be based on a need to "alleviate the political pressures of the day."

Meanwhile, Republican Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas sought to stop the proposal outright, introducing an amendment to an appropriations bill that would deny the FCC the funding to explore and develop new regulatory mandates. It was co-sponsored by five Republicans.

"The case has simply not been made for what amounts to a significant regulatory intervention into a vibrant marketplace," Hutchison said in a statement.

Ben Scott, policy director at advocacy group Free Press, which complained to the FCC about Comcast’s old network management practices in 2007, said the Internet is now of such importance that government will have to take a role in making sure it works optimally.

"It is inevitably going to have a regulatory structure around it," Scott said. "... What we’re deciding is: What is it going to look like?"

Yahoo Director To Step Down at End of Year

Yahoo director Maggie Wilderotter plans to step down from the slumping Internet company’s board at the end of this year. The resignation will leave Yahoo with 11 directors.

The Sunnyvale-based company said Friday that Wilderotter is leaving to devote more time to her other responsibilities. Wilderotter is CEO of Frontier Communications Corp., which sells telephone, television and Internet services.

Wilderotter joined Yahoo’s board in 2004. She has been overseeing the company’s audit committee.

Like other Yahoo directors, Wilderotter came under fire last year for the handling of a takeover bid from Microsoft. The software maker withdrew a $47.5 billion offer in May 2008 after Yahoo's board authorized co-founder Jerry Yang to demand more money.

China Clamps Down on Internet Ahead of 60th Anniversary

Security forces with black masks and machine guns on the streets of China's capital are just the more visible side of a security clampdown in the country this month: there is also its secretive battle to control the Internet.

The heightened security comes ahead of a massive military parade Beijing will hold in the heart of the city next week to celebrate China's 60th anniversary of communist rule, an event the government hopes will showcase the country's development and go untarnished by security threats or shows of dissent. China's newest nuclear missiles will be included in the arsenal of weapons and equipment shown off in the parade, according to state-run media.

Security measures have included a crackdown this month on online tools that help users circumvent the "Great Firewall," the set of technical measures China uses to filter the Internet, according to providers of the tools.

"They put more resources into the blocking," said Bill Xia, president of Dynamic Internet Technology, which makes a widely used anti-censorship program called Freegate.

"It has been getting worse and worse this month," he said.

Many expatriates and savvy locals in China rely on Freegate as well as proxy servers and virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass blocks that China places on Web sites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. But accessing some of those tools has become more difficult in recent weeks.

China has always blocked IP (Internet Protocol) addresses it believes are used by Freegate, which routes users' communication through foreign IP addresses to grant access to Web sites blocked in China. But this month it became more aggressive and began blocking a wider range of IP addresses, risking taking down unrelated targets in order to hit more Freegate users, Xia said. The moves have left most users unable to use the program, prompting Xia's company to ready an updated version of Freegate that will be available in a few days.

China also cranked up its efforts to stifle Freegate ahead of another sensitive date this year: the 20th anniversary of its bloody crackdown on student democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

Measures China uses to limit access to certain Web sites include altering entries in the DNS (domain name system), which translates URLs like www.google.com into the numeric IP addresses used to relay information online, and resetting a computer's connection when it tries to visit a banned site. The country's police force also patrols the Internet for sensitive or
pornographic content.

Authorities appear to have stepped up efforts to block other circumvention tools as well. China-based users of Hotspot Shield, another popular program that encrypts and reroutes online activity, have had problems accessing the program's Web site since last month, a representative of developer AnchorFree said in an e-mail.

China last month also started blocking the Web site of Blacklogic, a VPN provider, a company representative said, though the Web site can currently be accessed from China. The company had to switch to a new tunneling protocol when some users recently became unable to connect to any servers, the representative said.

"I'm unable to tell you with a 100 percent guarantee what [technical] measures are taken in China to interfere with our service, but these measures are being taken," the representative said.

Not all VPN providers appear to have been affected. China has mainly blocked free VPNs and proxies while allowing similar paid services, a representative of VPN provider 12vpn said in an e-mail.

Accessing blocked Web sites is fairly easy in China and many users do so through free Web-based proxies. Most VPN users in China are expatriates, but more local Chinese may be signing up as well. 12vpn and other tool providers said their number of China-based users rose after early July, when China blocked Facebook and Twitter.

Some VPN providers declined to comment for a news story for fear of drawing China's attention and potential restrictions on VPNs.

At least one Chinese city has adopted a further measure to monitor Internet traffic. The southern city of Guangzhou this month ordered Internet service providers to install "security monitoring" software on all servers and threatened punishment for failure to do so, according to government notices posted on the blog of one data center management company. Two such software programs, called Blue Shield and Huadun, were recommended in one of the government notices. Huadun's Web site says the program helps server owners remove illegal and pornographic content from their systems.

The software is meant to "create a favorable online environment" for China's National Day celebration next week, the government orders said. A representative of the data center company reached by phone said it put the orders on the blog for reference by clients and that the order applied only to Guangzhou.

Some of China's new security measures could remain in place long after the 60th anniversary celebrations, but others are likely to be lifted. China has long gone through cycles of blocking and allowing access to Web sites such as YouTube and Wikipedia, and updates to Freegate have repeatedly allowed the tool to bypass evolving government security measures against it.

Still, Chinese users have posted skeptical notes on Twitter about China's newest Internet controls. When asked if Twitter and Facebook would be unblocked after the National Day celebration next week, one user said they would not.

"Last year we had the Olympics, this year is National Day (which actually happens every year), and next year is the World Expo," the user

wrote. "Actually, every year and every month and every day are sensitive."

With A Fresh Focus on Design, Laptops Come of Age

Say goodbye to the "black brick" laptop. The era of the plain, dowdy PC is officially over.

As computer makers roll out their new notebooks and netbooks ahead of the end-year holiday shopping season, razor-thin, sleek and colorful are most definitely in, as are arresting designs in an ever-expanding array of choices.

Hewlett-Packard Co and Dell Inc are now more likely to point to subtle etchings in the exterior shell, or a famous artist behind a new design, than to the "speeds and feeds" that PC makers used to tout when they wrestled for technological superiority.

It was only a few years ago that most laptops were some variation of a dull box that came in gray or black, with the exception of Apple Inc, which was making distinctive laptops back in the 1990s.

Now, design is permeating the PC market like never before as the increasing commoditization of machines leaves few major differentiators on performance, so a stylish case is one of the last remaining areas of competition.

Ed Boyd, vice president of design for consumer products at Dell, the world’s No. 2 PC maker, arrived at the company nearly two years ago from Nike Inc. He said the PC market is transforming in the way that athletic shoes did.

Nike "took a commoditized product - sneakers - and made it hip and cool and relevant," he said. "What you’re witnessing is the same transformation in the PC business ... this phenomenon is crossing both the enterprise and the consumer space"

As PCs have become ever more light and portable, consumers and businesses are placing a premium on the look of machines that are now more likely to travel out of the home or office.

And PC makers are using design to target different demographics, such as HP’s collaboration with fashion designer Vivienne Tam on netbooks aimed at fashion-forward women.

Stacy Wolff, director of notebook product design at HP, said the world’s largest maker of PCs took a "big gamble" when it began to focus on design in 2005 - one that he said has paid off. Prior to that, HP notebooks were essentially "technology in kind of a nondescript container," he said.

Wolff said HP’s new focus was immediately evident in its income statement: "Once we made it a strategic element of any development, our financials have just skyrocketed."

At the dawn of personal computing in the early 1980s, the first mobile PCs began to emerge from companies like Tandy, Osborne, NEC, Epson and

others. Many of the early models resembled slabs of beige plastic, bulkier than desktops today.

The early 1990s saw the launch of Apple’s PowerBook line, which helped set the standard for design, along with IBM’s ThinkPad. Sony’s sleek Vaio notebooks followed later in the decade, along with Apple’s colorful iBook line.

But PCs 10 years ago were still largely seen as vessels for technology, rather than design or fashion statements.

Jeff Barney, general manager of Toshiba America’s digital products division, said the company introduced color in PCs earlier this decade, but they failed to catch on. "The consumer wasn’t ready for it," he said. "We were just ahead of the trend."

As components became cheaper and lighter, PC vendors found more room to explore their creative side, bringing in new materials and finishes, and paying closer attention to design details to catch the eye of buyers.

"We think that design is one of the key buying criteria in retail for laptops," said Barney.

Thin and slick is one of the hottest trends, and the category is growing ever more competitive with Apple’s MacBook Air, Dell’s Adamo and HP’s new Envy line.

A PC buyer today can choose from a dizzying array of colors, textures and designs. "Personalization" is the order of the day. For example, Dell offers more than 200 exterior designs.

IDC analyst Richard Shim said the market began to shift around 2005 with lower PC prices. "Consumers started to become the overriding voice in the PC industry and what they were saying is: ’Look there’s enough performance here for me to do what I need to do ... but what I want is a PC that doesn’t look like everyone else’s,’" he said.

PC makers are first and foremost technology companies, he said, but they have realized that many buyers are more interested in what a notebook looks like than what’s inside.

Want Windows 7 for 50 Percent Off? Order an OEM Copy

Missed out on the early preorder discounts? Popular retailer Newegg.com has listed the OEM prices for Windows 7, which will be offered at less than half what Microsoft will charge for a retail copy.

Newegg hasn’t listed any prerequisites for buying the OEM version, such as the purchase of any additional hardware. Past OEM copies have prevented users from taking advantage of Microsoft’s support options, however, and the packaging and instructions are usually minimal.

For those willing to forgo the additional perks, however, the price may be worth it. Microsoft pursued a similar strategy with Windows Vista, charging "system builders," or anyone building a PC, about half of what it asked retail buyers to pay. Of course, that’s nothing compared to the huge preorder discounts that Microsoft offered in September, when it

offered a preordered copy for as little as $29.99.

According to a Newegg product page, a full 32-bit or 64-bit version of Windows 7 Home Premium will cost $109.99; with a $10 preorder discount that expires Oct. 20, Newegg will lower the price to $99.99. Normally, the upgrade price of Windows 7 Home Premium would be $119.99, and the full retail cost is $199.99.

The 64-bit version of Windows 7 Professional OEM will be priced at $139.99; for this version, Newegg will only offer a $5 discount, bringing the price down to $134.99. At retail, the upgrade and full versions of Windows 7 Professional would normally cost $199.99 and $299.99, respectively.

The OEM, 64-bit version of Windows 7 Ultimate, meanwhile, will be priced at $174.99. Newegg again will offer a discount of $15, good through Oct. 20, and bringing the price down to $174.99. Normally, the upgrade and full versions would cost $219.99 and $319.99 at retail.

A three-pack of Windows 7 Home Premium OEM will cost $309.99, while a three-pack of Windows 7 Ultimate OEM will cost $549.99. Newegg did not advertise a price for the three-pack version of Windows 7 Professional OEM.

Windows 7 ships to retailers on Oct. 22. While reports have circulated that Windows 7 may chip early, Microsoft said that users will probably receive Windows 7 when retailers do.

Google Suffers Second Email Disruption in a Month

Google Inc’s Web-based email service on Thursday suffered its second technical problem in a month as users reported difficulty accessing their contacts.

The disruption, which took 2-1/2 hours to resolve, followed a two-hour outage of Google’s news website this week. Earlier this month, a majority of its email users were unable to access the service for more than an hour after routers got overloaded during a routine server upgrade.

The series of disruptions comes as Google tries to compete with Microsoft Corp and International Business Machines Corp by extending its services to business users - who are likely to be less tolerant of long outages.

Reports of the latest glitch flooded the Twitter microblogging site, with users posting comments highlighting and griping about the situation.

"A problem with Google Contacts caused many Gmail users to experience slowness and degraded service for about an hour today," Google said in a statement.

"Mail was back to full speed for everyone around 8 am Pacific and the issue affecting Contacts was resolved shortly after. We’re sorry for the inconvenience."

Gmail already competes with Microsoft’s Hotmail and Yahoo Inc’s Web-based e-mail. Google offers its email service for free but also

sells a version to businesses with extra features and technical support for $50 per user per year.

Fear of outages, in addition to security concerns, has been a reason many businesses are wary of adopting "cloud computing" technologies offered by Google as well as Salesforce.com and Amazon.com, which help deliver data and services over the Internet.

To Fight Worms, Use Ants

To combat worms, Trojans and other malware, a team of security researchers wants to use ants.

Not the actual live insects, of course, but computer programs modeled to act like ants in the way they roam a network and search for anomalies. "Ants aren’t intelligent," says Glenn Fink, a senior research scientist at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory who came up with the idea for the project, "but as a colony ants exert some very intelligent behavior."

According to Fink and one of his project partners, associate professor Errin Fulp of Wake Forest University, their in-the-works project uses distributed data-collecting sensors that are modeled after the six-legged natural creatures. But where ants may leave scent trails to guide other ants to a discovered threat or food source, Fink’s sensors pass along collected data to other sensors in an attempt to identify anomalous behavior that may signal a malware infection in a large-scale network.

As information is collected, different varieties of ants may be activated to collect different types of data, Fink says. One might look for a higher-than-normal cpu usage, while another may check out network traffic.

And as with actual ant colonies, the system uses a hierarchy of programs. The sensor ants report to host-based sentinels that sit still and collect data from the ants, and the sentinels in turn are below sergeants, which are tasked with presenting data to humans and passing down their orders to the digital colony.

While early-stage tests of the system have successfully identified computer worms, "a lot of the higher-level reasoning has yet to be done," Fulp says. It’s one thing to collect data from the insect-simulating sensors, and another to accurately interpret and process it.

The challenge, as Fink puts it, is, "How do you talk to an ant?"

French Exec Blames Email for Staff Stress

A top executive at France’s biggest telecommunications company, which is dealing with a spate of suicides, warned that the barrage of emails from smartphones and personal computers was stressing out employees.

While France Telecom Chief Financial Officer Gervais Pellissier did not

directly blame suicides on around-the-clock email, he said workers in all big companies are under more pressure in the age of the BlackBerry.

"Today for people working in business, whatever the level, whether they are CEO or even first- or second-rank level employees, they are always connected," he told Reuters in an interview on Thursday.

France Telecom, which operates under the Orange brand, has come under public scrutiny after 22 workers committed suicide and another 13 attempted to kill themselves since the start of 2008.

Pellissier said some employees were clearly feeling a lot of pressure due to the privatization of France Telecom, but he added that this was compounded by new technologies that cause work to encroach increasingly on personal lives.

"When you were an average employee in a big corporation 15 years ago, you had no mobile phone or no PC at home. When you were back home, work was out," he said.

Research in Motion’s popular BlackBerry has been dubbed CrackBerry in the United States, where some users say they are addicted to checking emails.

Pellissier said such practices may be taking a bigger toll on workers than has been acknowledged by his company or others.

As a result a fragile employee with difficulties would probably have more confusion with "more mixture between personal life and professional life than in the past."

"That is probably something we’ve not undertaken, not only at France Telecom but, it’s more a global society issue, the impact of the new ways of working on personal behavior," Pellissier said.

He did not say how the balance could be addressed but noted that his company was taking the suicides very seriously.

France Telecom Chief Executive Didier Lombard said earlier this month the company was adding surveillance and counseling services as the pace of suicides among employees had picked up. One man had stabbed himself in the stomach during a staff meeting while a woman threw herself out a window.

Pellissier talked about stress caused by workers changing jobs, skills and locations as France Telecom recreates itself as a private company from a government agency. More than 15,000 of its roughly 102,000 workers had big job changes in the last five years as a result of the privatization, he said.

He said the company would have to do a lot in the coming weeks to help resolve the suicide problem.

"It’s a serious issue. We have to deal with it," he said.

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